

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **3**

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Reagan's decision on Trident could set course for arms talks

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WASHINGTON - President Ronald Reagan is expected to make a decision early next week that could significantly affect the future of the arms control process, relations with the Soviet Union and Western Europe and his ability to secure congressional support for his key defense programs.

At issue is whether to continue to observe, to breach in part, or to totally abandon the unratified SALT II treaty as a new Trident submarine, whose 24 missiles would bring the United States to 14 missiles above the treaty ceiling, prepares for sea trials.

The fundamental choice will be thrashed out at a National Security Council meeting on Monday, well-placed sources say. The meeting was to have been held this week, but the President's tix message, the visit of King Hussein of Jordan and Reagan's barnstorming trip today and tomorrow to generate support for tax reform set back the schedule.

"I personally feel this is the most important arms control decision the President is likely to make in eight years in office," one ranking official declared.

Officials at the White House, State Department and Pentagon agreed that the options are essentially as follows:

- Agree to continue an informal agreement not to undercut the draft treaty even after its nominal expiration at the end of the year but, because of alleged Soviet violations, make a case for accelerating certain defense programs as a counter to Russian activities.

- Declare that the United States will observe some of the treaty restraints, but will only disarm a 16-missile Poseidon submarine, rather than dismantle it, as a warning to the Russians that there is a price to pay for their failure to strictly comply with the agreement.

In addition, he might declare his determination to proceed with a new, mobile, single-warhead intercontinental Ballistic Missile, nicknamed the Midgetman, in response to Soviet development of the new SS25 mobile missile.

- Abandon the constraints of SALT II, and perhaps also SALT I, on the argument the US cannot continue one-sided observance of agreements violated by the Soviets. This would be accompanied by an effort to convince the public and Congress that a greater defense effort, rather than primary reliance on the arms control process, is necessary to ensure a stable balance of power.

May review Soviet compliance

Several senior officials said they expect the President to choose some variant of the second option, with the proviso that he will review Soviet performance over the next year or so and will be prepared to dismantle the Poseidon or convert it to some other use if the Russians satisfy Washington that they are coming into compliance with SALT II requirements.

While Congress had asked for a report by Saturday on the status of Soviet noncompliance with the draft treaty and what the Administration proposes to do about it, White House spokesman Larry Speakes yesterday said the report will be delayed while a decision is made and the allies are consulted. Secretary of State George P. Shultz goes to Portugal Tuesday for a NATO foreign ministers meeting and could consult with them then, sources said.

Press reports notwithstanding, senior officials say it is unlikely Reagan will defer his policy decision until fall.

The principal advocates of abandoning SALT II are Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger and Richard N. Perle, assistant secretary for international security, who point out that Reagan,

long before coming to the White House, labeled the treaty "fatally flawed," because the Russians have been cheating on its provisions along with those of other arms control agreements and because even if it had been ratified it would have expired at year end. To do nothing, they contend, would make a mockery of the arms control process, signaling the Russians they can ignore agreements with impunity.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, sources say, have been reluctant to contradict their civilian leaders, but are concerned that without constraints the Russians will build up while Congress will prevent the US from matching them or even cut back the defense budget to penalize the Administration for "sabotaging" the arms control process. In addition, they are said to fear a seriously adverse reaction from the NATO allies.

Officials split

Officials at the State Department, the White House and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency are split among those who advocate continuing with the agreement, but asking for greater funding for defense, or others who urge pulling the missiles from a Poseidon sub, but keeping it available for refitting and sending back to sea if the Soviets continue to violate the agreement.

The alleged violations include: Soviet encoding of telemetry from missile tests which make it difficult to ascertain whether it is observing SALT II constraints, developing both the 10-warhead SS24 and single-warhead SS25 when it agreed to build only one "new type" ICBM, and marginally exceeding the ceiling on missiles and long-range bombers.

According to one intelligence estimate, without SALT constraints the Russians could double or triple the number of warheads on their 308 big 10-warhead SS18 missiles alone.